



Title	Grounded theory in sales research: an investigation of salespeoples' client relationships
Authors(s)	Geiger, Susi, Turley, Darach
Publication date	2003
Publication information	Geiger, Susi, and Darach Turley. "Grounded Theory in Sales Research: An Investigation of Salespeoples' Client Relationships." Emerald, 2003. https://doi.org/10.1108/08858620310492437 .
Publisher	Emerald
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5327
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1108/08858620310492437

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**Grounded Theory in Sales Research:
An Investigation of Salespeople's Client Relationships**

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Special Issue "Interpretive Research in Business-to-Business Marketing"

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing

Word count: 8,228

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Grounded Theory in Sales Research: An Investigation of Salespeople's Client Relationships

Keywords: Grounded theory, sales research, relationship selling, interpretive methods

Abstract:

In this paper, grounded theory as an inductive method of theory generation in business research is presented and critically evaluated. The historical and epistemological backgrounds of the method are discussed, its research procedures are briefly outlined, and its suitability for sales research assessed. To illustrate the principles of the method, a study of the nature of business-to-business sales relationships is introduced. The results of this study show clearly that grounded theory can yield highly significant findings in areas that deal with phenomena as complex as human relationships, where the construction of theoretical frameworks cannot be achieved at the cost of conceptual density.

Grounded Theory in Business Research

Over the last two decades, interpretive methods of inquiry have found increasing acceptance both in management and marketing research. In this context, it is especially surprising that one of the qualitative research approaches with the longest pedigree, grounded theory, has remained at the margin of this development. Among the most frequently used qualitative methods in sociology and health research, the grounded theory method has been justly called “the missing methodology on the interpretivist agenda” of business research (Goulding, 1998, p. 50). Indeed, despite repeated calls for its inclusion in the business researcher's toolkit (Turner, 1983; Goulding, 1998; Meamber, 2000; Partington, 2000; Gupta *et al.*, 2000; Locke, 2001), the number of empirical studies based

on the method has remained astonishingly low both in management and marketing research.

The primary focus of this paper is to outline grounded theory's value as a qualitative tool of inquiry by examining its theoretical provenance, working principles and methodological procedures. In addition, it will report on the results of an empirical study carried out according to the grounded theory rubric to illustrate both the practicalities of using the method and the calibre of theoretical dividend it can yield. In line with similar studies in services marketing (Locke, 1996), consumer research (Fournier, 1998), marketing strategy (Noble and Mokwa, 1999) and marketing communications (Asif and Sargeant, 2000), this paper proposes grounded theory as a fruitful method for business-to-business research in general and sales research in particular.

The grounded theory method

Grounded theory can be described as a research method in social sciences that is aimed at the development of theory grounded in empirical data. It puts forward a detailed strategy for collecting and analyzing material with the aim of developing systematic theories about the phenomenon under study. The material to be analyzed can originate from a variety of sources such as interviews, observations, documents, or survey data. Although grounded theory lends itself to the analysis of qualitative data, quantitative material can also be used; the emphasis of the method is not on the way data are collected, but on how they are subsequently analyzed. To this end, grounded theory serves as a "rigorous, orderly guide" (Glaser, 1978, p. 2) to the development of hypotheses that have their origins in the empirical world as opposed to being derived

from deductive reasoning.

By advocating procedures to arrive at theories from empirical data, grounded theory represents an alternative to the logico-deductive approach to theory development, where hypotheses are typically formulated away from the field and then empirically verified. In grounded theory, concepts are derived from empirical data, linked, and, if necessary, modified through constant comparison with other data. In this sense, the method incorporates induction, deduction and verification in the same process (Strauss, 1987). This emphasis on rigorous theory development from empirical data also distinguishes grounded theory from many other qualitative approaches. It explicitly aims to go beyond the ‘thick description’ of cases, individuals, or settings, which is the aim of more phenomenologically oriented qualitative methods.

Unfortunately for the founding fathers of the method, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, the title “Grounded Theory” has been adopted rather indiscriminately by a variety of researchers over the past three decades to denote qualitative studies that are at best tenuously based on the methodology they formulated. This development has more than likely been the upshot of a protracted and often acrimonious dispute between Glaser and Strauss centering on the requisite level of detachment/involvement of the researcher vis-à-vis her data. The outcome has been that any reference to ‘grounded theory’ today would be incomplete if not accompanied by an indication of the ‘school’ and period of development to which it refers.

The present study was conducted as much as possible in line with the original formulation of grounded theory in “The Discovery of Grounded Theory” (1967). However, as this book does not explicate specific analysis strategies as much as the more

recent ones from either camp, much of the analysis was carried out with the help of suggestions made in Strauss' (1987) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990 and 1998) works.

Philosophical background

Using Guba and Lincoln's (1994) fourfold classification of research paradigms the original formulation of the method would likely be characterized as post-positivist (Annells, 1996). Although Glaser and Strauss (1967) do not explicitly discuss epistemological or ontological issues, it seems that their work is based on the premise of an outside reality to be taken into account by the research act. Even if this reality is to be reflected in the theory as faithfully as possible, it is implicitly recognized that research efforts will never fully capture the 'buzzing, blooming confusion' of social reality (Strauss, 1987, p. 6). While there is still a firm belief in the 'cumulative nature of knowledge and theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 35), Glaser and Strauss move away from the positivistic ambition to accurately and fully *represent* reality. Rather, it is the pragmatic usefulness and relevance of the theory to concerned parties that comes to the fore. Theory development, according to "Discovery", should emphasize change and process, variability and complexity.

Grounded theory is conceived of as a way of studying social actors as well as their relationships, interactions, and conflicts in an ever-changing world. In this sense, it seems particularly suitable for marketing and sales research, as these areas often necessitate research tools that are more accommodating of the complexity and fluidity of person-to-person interaction than standard survey instruments.

Grounded theory procedures

Before illustrating the specific procedures of grounded theory in a study of sales relationships, a brief overview of its broad methodological underpinnings is warranted. First, it is not recommended to commence the research with an idea of what the theory to be described could look like or even what the problem in a particular research setting is. Rather, the research problem is as much discovered in the field as are the ways to resolve it. Typically this discovery should be made on foot of real life immersion of the researcher in the sphere to be researched while at the same time endeavoring to remain detached from it (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Second, grounded theorists do not believe in the value of a representative sample. There is no minimum or maximum sample size. Rather, sampling in the early field stages should cover a wide range of incidents, indiscriminate of their apparent relevance to the study. Later sampling efforts should proceed according to the theoretical relevance of the characteristics of the units sampled and the completeness of the theoretical framework (Glaser, 1998). Thus, grounded theory not only allows but rather mandates the interplay of sampling, data collection, and analysis, from the very first stages throughout the whole research process (Strauss, 1987).

A third feature of grounded theory in both initial and subsequent incarnations has been its emphasis on the analysis phase of the research endeavor. Grounded theory is “a general method that can be used on all data in whatever combination”; hence the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data is not relevant for grounded theory (Glaser, 1998, p. 42).

Fourth, the minute analytical coding and categorizing of the data set are not only

the most central features in grounded theory, but also a constant in the writings of both founders. It is a process that allows the data analysis and ensuing theory to be more reliable than “the kind of imaginative linkages which can be developed in essays written after a couple of readings through the data” (Turner, 1983, p. 333). To this end, both Glaser (1978) and Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) propose a multi-stage coding approach where interview transcripts, field notes and research memos are subjected to minute and repeated scrutiny, which will be illustrated below. The success of this process is ultimately predicated on the researcher’s ‘theoretical sensitivity’, that is the skill in recognizing connections between emerging concepts and identifying a core category that acts as the storyline or main theme of the research.

How to Evaluate Grounded Theory Research

An intrinsic characteristic of the grounded theory method has been a concern with the plausibility and relevance of the emerging theory to the research participants. Instead of adopting quantitative terminology to evaluate grounded theories, both Glaser and Strauss propose a threefold range of criteria to appraise the credibility of such research.

The first is *adequacy*; the researcher’s firm conviction that she/he has correctly understood the perspectives and meanings of the actors whom she/he has studied and ‘knows’ about the social world studied in a very profound way (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Second is *relevance and applicability*: does the theory *fit* the substantive area in which it is used, is it *understandable* to laypeople in the area, is it sufficiently *general* to be applicable to a multitude of situations, but at the same time not too abstract to lose its relevance, does it allow the user partial *control* over situations and change processes (Glaser and Strauss, 1965)? The third criterion is *modifiability*. Grounded theorists are

concerned least the ‘world passes their theories by’ (Glaser, 1978, p. 5). Any grounded theory will only maintain its relevance if it is constantly adapted to changing social processes.

The discussion of the research findings below will illustrate how these criteria have been adopted for the present study.

An illustration of grounded theory research: Salespeople and their client relationships

Research objectives

The initial impetus to conduct this research was a desire to explore salesperson’s client knowledge in personal relationships. The personal interaction between a salesperson and her client in a business-to-business context has two characteristics that set it apart from other business interactions: it usually involves both repeated interaction and personal contact between buyer and seller. Thus, the buyer-seller relationships studied here are what Macneil (1980, p. 13) calls ‘primary relations’: they are unlimited in scope, unique and non-transferable. They involve informal as well as formal communication and economic as well as social exchange.

As has been shown in social psychology research (for example Reis and Knee 1996), in primary relations both parties accumulate a more or less extensive pool of knowledge of the other party. The initial objective of this research was twofold: first, to explore the pool of knowledge a salesperson holds of her client and second, how this knowledge influences the client relationship. In addition, the authors pursued the explicit aim of building up an analytical and at the same time dense picture of the client-salesperson interaction in relation to knowledge development.

Given the scarcity of extant research in this particular area, the authors of this paper considered a number of alternatives to the dominant survey method that were more explorative in nature. Ethnography had been proposed as a methodological vista for broadening the scope of existing sales force research by Swan, McInnis-Bowers and Trawick Jr. in 1996. However, since most ethnographic studies have been directed toward the creation of ‘thick descriptions’ of research settings rather than theory development (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994), this option was not pursued.

Action research (for example Argyris *et al.*, 1985) was also considered for the present study because of its potential to solve practical problems. However, its injunction to induce change in the field of study requires the application by the researcher of some existing theory to the research site in order to ascertain the optimal terminus ad quem for this change. The lack of such a theory in the realm of relationship knowledge in sales represented a major impediment to the use of an action research approach. In the final analysis, the grounded theory method was chosen for this inquiry because it offers a stringent yet flexible method for inductive theory development in areas where theory is either still evolving or in need of updating (Locke 2001).

Sampling and fieldwork

As mentioned previously, primary research in the grounded theory method proceeds through an interplay of theoretical sampling, data collection and data analysis. In the present study it was decided to restrict the inquiry to business-to-business salespersons working in the Irish Republic for ‘indigenous’ companies in the sense that they had an independent Irish operation selling into the Irish market. Sampling evolved according to Glaser and Strauss’ recommendations from an initially broad sample of sales

representatives and sales managers working in such diverse industries as confectionery and drinks manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, corporate finance and marketing services, to a more focused sampling approach during later field stages (see table 1 for an industry breakdown of the final sample).

Data collection methods used were in-depth interviews as well as observations during sales calls in the field and sales team meetings; 36 salespersons in all were interviewed and 5 full days of observational data collected. Individual interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and followed an open-ended structure.

Industry	Number of participating companies	Number of interviews carried out	Observations
Advertising and media	4	9	No
Financial services	1	8	Sales meetings
Telecommunications	1	1	No
Food and drink	5	9	Sales visits and sales meetings
Wholesale	1	4	No
Real estate	1	1	No
Building, machinery and hardware	4	4	Sales visits

Table 1: Interviewees and their industries

During the initial fieldwork, interview questions focused on salespeople’s client knowledge in a general way. Respondents were asked to reflect on the extent of their client knowledge, how they used it, how they stored it, and how it was shared with work colleagues. Interview transcripts were then analyzed according to what Strauss and Corbin (1990) call ‘open coding’. This, the first of three distinct coding processes, involves the coders approaching the data with completely open minds as to what they may signify.

During this process, each interview was analyzed individually and then compared to previously collected data with a view to identifying categories that embraced

similarities and differences between cases. Both authors coded each transcript separately before recoding it in joint analysis sessions until agreement could be reached on every single category. In cases where both researchers could not reach agreement during recoding sessions, the categories were memoed and subsequent respondents were probed on these issues. Memos functioned simultaneously as tools for individual reflection, research diaries, and prompts for further inquiries.

The result of this open coding process yielded over 200 codes or categories. From the coders' point of view, the most surprising development at this stage was the emergence of categories that had more to do with the salesperson's relationship *with* than knowledge *of* her clients. Put simply, the data suggested that salespersons' client knowledge was intrinsically linked to the type of relationship the sales professional entertains with her client. As a consequence, respondents were now asked specifically about different client relationships, the nature and development of these relationships, and appropriate maintenance strategies. In grounded theory, such a shift in focus is considered a sign that the inquiry is driven by the data rather than by the researchers' prior knowledge or interests (Glaser, 1978).

During the second, 'axial coding' stage, the entire dataset was revisited through the prism of relational dimensions. At this juncture, the researchers focused on discovering higher-order connections between categories. 'Relationship type' transpired to be the central category connecting most other salient concepts such as personality factors, knowledge development, relationship outcome, and cultivation strategy.

The third and final coding stage, 'selective coding' (Strauss and Corbin 1990), involved looking for the 'storyline' in the data and any gaps within it. These gaps acted as

a catalyst for additional fieldwork during which sampling was highly directed. As an example, to explore relational differences between service and product industries, ‘extreme cases’ in both sectors were interviewed. Similarly, a remaining question in the emerging framework was the impact of relationship type on sales negotiation. To explore this issue, representatives selling into sectors where ‘hardball’ negotiation is the norm – for example retail multiples - were interviewed and observed.

Data collection and sampling continued until such a time as additional data yielded no incremental insight and ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was reached. A final test of the emerging framework was conducted in the form of a member check: a short presentation of the findings together with a one-page questionnaire was mailed to research participants to ensure that it captured their experiences adequately.

Personal and not so personal relationships

At the end of the data analysis process detailed above, three different relationship prototypes had emerged within the core category ‘relationship type’, namely the ‘business only’ relationship, the ‘cultivated’ relationship and the ‘untainted’ relationship. The data analysis revealed that these three relationship types not only differ in the balance between economic and personal exchange that enters into the interaction, but that each is characterized by a number of additional distinctive features, as will be discussed below. While all sales relationships studied are set within the strategic parameters of economic exchange, the interaction can incorporate a greater or lesser degree of intimacy, friendship, deceit, personal information exchange, trust, and a number of other factors.

Interestingly, it seems that the three relationship types uncovered from the participants’ accounts do not represent a hierarchy of more or less successful or

effective types of interaction. Judging by the interviews and observations, all three relationship types can provide both economic and noneconomic satisfaction to the interacting parties – they can thus all be classified as ‘high-quality’ relationships (Crosby *et al.*, 1990).

The ‘business only’ relationship

Q: Do you have buyers who would be your friends?

A: Not particularly. Not that I consider, and I don’t think they consider me as a friend. If I was buying something from somebody, I would buy something from a friend but I probably would think that I didn’t get the best deal.

Q: Why is that?

A: Because I’d always think that [...] it is practically impossible to get the best deal off somebody who is your best friend. Just the same as if you are buying something off your family you are never going to get the best deal because you are never going to be tough with them, are you? You can’t really be tough with them.

Machinery

As this excerpt indicates, some respondents maintain that ‘business is best’ in a relationship with a buyer and carefully avoid letting intimacy and friendship enter the interaction. The main argument against a very close client relationship is the fear that one or both sides may be compromised in their business demeanor by an intimate knowledge of the other party. Sellers who maintain that relationships with buyers should focus solely on business matters are often afraid to lose the ability to negotiate the best deal for their own organizations, that being friendly with clients may imply not being able to ‘play hardball’ with them. Respondents who maintain this perspective do not seek a high level of social exchange and noneconomic satisfaction in their client interactions. Often, they work in industry sectors where margins are tight, buyer power is substantial and competition is played out mainly on price levels. In such environments, the fear is that any move by one player that indicates the human element behind the business could be interpreted as a negotiation weakness by the other player and exploited in the situation.

Too much emphasis on a friendly level of interaction may also be perceived as unprofessional and damage a seller's credibility in the longer term.

Some respondents who favor a business-only relationship not only fear that their own negotiation stance may be jeopardized, but are also concerned that familiarity may breed contempt in their own minds. They fear that if they feel 'home and dry' with a client, as one respondent put it, their service level may slacken or they may be tempted to take advantage of the trusting client by selling him offers that suit their own interests more than the buyer's. Again, these fears illustrate that adversity is perceived to rule the sales interaction in a 'business only' relationship, despite the veneer of a relationship between buyer and seller. It is the classical non-cooperative scenario of game theory where both players choose not to be bound by social commitments and where they pursue economic goals at the expense of noneconomic ones (Blau, 1964).

Interviewees who pursue a 'business only' approach in their client interactions do nonetheless admit that they exchange personal details with their clients and that they often socialize together. Some of them regularly take their clients on business trips and inevitably spend a considerable amount of time in their company, thus building up a significant store of personal knowledge on the client. So, even if the focus remains on the business side of the relationship, respondents who maintain this type of interaction with their clients still perceive it to be a 'personal' relationship. It is a long-term, personal interaction characterized by mutual knowledge and trust in the other's competence and commitment to the partnership. It is however a personal relationship in which, for reasons of industry ethics or personal preferences, both partners are aware of the downsides of too much personal knowledge and intimacy.

The ‘cultivated’ relationship

In his study of ‘The Milkman and his Customer’ (1972), Odis Bigus defines cultivating as “the courting and wooing activities engaged in by servicers in relations with those whom they service” (p. 131). This type of interaction has also had a dominant place in the accounts of the participants of this research study. It appears that a ‘cultivated’ relationship is one in which both the personal *and* business dimensions are actively nurtured by the participants.

Aware of the gains that a close co-operative buyer-seller relationship can bring to the parties, many respondents tried to develop a friendly relationship with their buyers while at the same time ensuring that they could ‘stand up for themselves’ if the interaction became confrontational. Personal elements enter this kind of relationship mainly for tactical reasons, to promote trust, and to expedite the business interaction. Even if a certain level of intimacy and friendship is present, both parties are aware that the relationship is embedded in a strategic context, and they pursue their own agendas at all times.

Salespeople working in this mode of interaction go through the motions of establishing a social relationship but are unlikely to bare their innermost feelings to their counterparts. Even if clients are treated as if they were ‘real’ friends, the commercial context ensures that a certain distance is kept at all times. Keeping such a twin track by maintaining an independent business stance while at the same time befriending the client is a very thin line to negotiate, as many sales professionals acknowledge:

Last Saturday, I was with H. [a client]. I spent the day with him, he was with two customers, I had lunch with him, we went to watch the Ireland-Italy game in the pub, we had a lot of drink, we had burgers that night, we went to the pub and had a very, very long day and I got a taxi home. I wouldn’t necessarily say I enjoyed

myself quite terribly. It was a bit of fun, I sold him two machines, it enhanced our social relationship, we are still very friendly, but it got kind of tedious toward the end. Because there's only so much time you can spend with someone who doesn't know you that intimately without it getting tedious.

Machinery

A cultivated relationship is designed to be 'used in a constructive way', as one interviewee admitted. It enables the parties to open up channels of communication that are closed in a 'business only' relationship. For instance, in many cases the personal dimension of the relationship represents a neutral level of interaction to which the players can retreat if the business dimension is temporarily unstable or if both parties are involved in adversarial sales negotiations. In this sense, the personal relationship provides a safety net that prevents the functional level from breaking down and acts as a catalyst to solve problems at the economic level of interaction.

Thus, the cultivated relationship takes advantage of the benefits of a personal relationship while at the same time affording enough space for the participants to fight their own (commercial) corners. If the players succeed in keeping a balance between the interpersonal and the economic focus, it can represent the ideal scenario for a long-term sales relationship that is highly profitable and that at the same time yields a higher level of noneconomic satisfaction for the individual participants than a 'business-only' relationship.

In the 'cultivated' interaction mode, which was found across all industries in this study, the social event takes on a pivotal role. With regard to new accounts in particular social outings are used as icebreakers to mark the beginning of the cultivated relationship:

Q: Would you take your clients out to social occasions, lunches, or dinners?

A: Yes, we try to do this as much as we can, because it is a great way of breaking down the barriers. There is nothing like having a few drinks with somebody and having a laugh with him. It inevitably improves relationships, even if it is only for a short time. Straight away, you see it in the client the next day: you take him out to

lunch today, you see it in the way he behaves tomorrow. On the phone, in person, everything. It is so much more you are pals, working with you as opposed to against you. You can see a complete change in attitude.

Advertising

Sometimes, it seems that even hostile clients who are set to engage in an adversarial relationship with the salesperson can be disarmed by a well-orchestrated social occasion and lured into a cultivated relationship with the seller. A lot of salespeople pride themselves in being able to ‘break’ difficult clients through an astute use of social events. More effectively than face-to-face interaction in a business environment, the social outing allows the salesperson to portray herself as an individual rather than yet another salesperson calling into a buyer’s office. In addition, it often allows the salesperson to collect information about the buyer’s personal circumstances that would not have been volunteered in the more formal office setting, where roles are more narrowly defined and adhered to.

The ‘untainted’ relationship

In contrast with some of the respondents cited earlier who either think that ‘business is best’ or who endeavor to strike a balance between the social and the business dimensions, a number of interviewees claimed that they entertained what could be called ‘untainted’ friendships with some of their clients. These respondents did not consider a high level of intimacy and personal knowledge as a threat to the business; on the contrary they believe that the business can only benefit from such a friendship:

So we become friends and I find it easier that you can actually raise the subject. When you are friends with somebody, you put it back: hold on, don’t screw me, we’re mates, so if you screw me I will tell you not to screw me. And if it turns out that he HAS screwed you, then maybe he is not such a friend, because friends look after each other, in business AND outside. [...] And what it does, it cuts a lot of the [unfinished sentence]. In business, especially in our business where rates are pretty negotiable depending on how much you are spending, there is a lot of mistrust as to whether everybody else is getting more money for their advertising spots than I am

getting. And I don't know. So I am never really sure: am I being screwed or am I doing well out of this? I never know exactly, the odd time you'd find out but you never really know how much the other stations get. You BYPASS that with your friend because you now trust him.

Media

According to this interviewee and others, if the relationship shifts from a mainly business-based relationship to a predominantly friendly relationship a different set of rules applies to the interaction: the rules of friendship. These rules imply that both parties can trust what the other party says and that both parties 'look out for each other' as much as their respective business interests allow it. It is the situation where a client-salesperson relationship acts directly as a buffer against competitors; if both parties know that they are getting a fair deal from the other, there is no need to seek out other business partners.

'Untainted' client relationships are characterized by the fact that the salesperson has a legitimate interest in the buyer as a business partner, but also a genuine concern for the buyer as a human being. Some salespeople derive a great sense of pleasure out of striking such friendships with their business counterparts; these sellers are also the ones who are convinced that the business can only benefit from such an 'untainted' client-seller relationship.

Thus, while intimacy in the 'business only' relationship spells an inability to push the other side hard enough to get the best deal, for those involved in 'untainted' relationships it means that there is no need to push in the first place because they are confident of obtaining the best deal anyway. This difference in approach to client interactions may be partly due to product characteristics. If the product is tangible with a known market value, the interaction may involve a higher level of price negotiation for which it is important to be detached from personal influence. If however the product is

intangible where both parties can never be sure what the exact market value is – as was found in the case of selling advertising slots in audio-visual media - a high level of trust may be necessary for both parties to be assured of the profitability of the deal.

The best way to forge such deep-seated trust, according to some respondents, is to establish a business relationship that shares many features with outside friendships, for example openness, honesty and a high level of non-economic exchange. Clearly such a client-salesperson relationship will never fully match an outside relationship, as the commercial agenda still represents the *raison d'être* of the relationship. It is however the relationship type that resembles outside relationships most in the level of openness and honesty present in the interaction.

Many salespeople who strive to engage their clients in ‘untainted’ relationships make a point of creating opportunities where the client can see their ‘real selves’ behind the salesperson mask. The social outing, in this relationship mode, is often used to mark a break with the roles that are adhered to in the office context. Including spouses in the social interaction, taking the client out on a private rather than a company budget, meeting the client out-of-hours or in casual clothing are all strategies used by sellers to signal that the relationship has moved to a different stage and that openness, mutual understanding and trust rather than adversity rule the interaction from now on.

To summarize, all one-to-one business relationships that continue over a certain length of time incorporate a certain amount of interpersonal exchange, and they are all set within the strategic context of the economic exchange. There seems to be a relational continuum with regard to the extent to which the social or economic aspects of the

interaction prevail; the three ideal types discussed merely represent the two extremes and the midpoint of this continuum. Which type of relationship is most beneficial in any given interaction is highly dependent on situational variables, industry ethics, and organizational cultures as well as on the personal dispositions of the participants. Through her continued interactions with the client, the salesperson will accumulate the knowledge necessary to gauge which type of interaction a client is able and willing to pursue. Often, it appears that implicitly, a process of trial and error guides the relationship development: within existing parameters any given buyer-seller constellation will over time establish the relationship type which is perceived to maximize both economic and personal benefits for both parties.

Conclusions

Summary of the study

In a research arena where knowledge development traditionally rests on a few select methods (Bush and Grant, 1994), the grounded theory method was chosen for this research endeavor as a method of inquiry that exploits the density of qualitative data while at the same time mandating a level of abstraction that ensures a transcendence of the individual case. The results presented offer a categorization of personal relationships as well as an explanatory framework that integrates different relationship types with a number of antecedent and mediating variables such as industry type, personality factors and knowledge development. The framework presented is abstract enough to allow for an analysis of new cases of buyer-seller relationships. It is also dense enough to convey a vivid picture of real-life buyer-seller relationships – it is a grounded analysis of relationship types in business-to-business selling.

This insight into the tapestry of buyer seller relationships gives added texture to extant research on relationship marketing where many studies have chosen to delimit their focus exclusively to the antecedents and consequences of close salesperson-client relationships (for example Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Brock Smith, 1998; Selnes, 1998; Sharma *et al.*, 1999; Boles *et al.*, 1997; Keillor *et al.*, 2000; Boles *et al.*, 2000). All of these studies have (often implicitly) assumed that a straight dichotomy exists between high- and low-quality relationships or between effective relationships and ineffective relationships. The study presented in this article sheds a closer light on the nature and diversity of salesperson-client relationships. By using the grounded theory method, this inquiry was able to corroborate and expand extant efforts to investigate the nature of buyer-seller relationships qualitatively (Swan *et al.* 2001; Liljander and Roos 2002). At the same time, it is hoped that an analytical layer has been added to this literature that will allow future research to generalize these qualitative findings in a more deductive manner.

Validity of the research endeavor

As discussed, grounded theory proponents have put forward a number of credibility criteria for research conducted in the spirit of the method, namely adequacy, fitness (or relevance) and modifiability. The authors of this paper tried to assure the *adequacy* of the analysis by the following procedures: they adhered as closely to grounded theory principles and processes as possible and they coded the data independently before recoding them in joint sessions in order to ensure the highest possible degree of intercoder reliability. In addition, memos and diary entries were composed in order to achieve analytical distance from the data; literature was consulted at the latter stages of the analysis process to evaluate the similarities and differences of the

framework to extant literature and to check for any oversights.

The *relevance* of the results to research participants and other actors in the field was evaluated through a member-check in the form of a mail survey including a short questionnaire and an executive summary of the study, which confirmed the findings and demonstrated a widely positive reception of the framework.

Lastly, *modifiability* of the framework was ensured by its deliberately open character. Rather than claiming that the results are all-inclusive and general, the authors of this paper invite other researchers to test the model against different types of industry, relational constellations, national cultures, gender differences and – most importantly – against the course of time. It is more than likely that with the increasing adoption of electronic means of interaction in industrial selling in particular, the framework presented will benefit from expansion and updating.

Theoretical and managerial implications

On a theoretical level, this research has opened up an area of inquiry that, surprisingly enough, has until now remained almost unquestioned by existing research. Even though an ample body of literature has previously examined the antecedents and consequences of personal buyer-seller relationships, this research sheds valuable light on the actual nature of the buyer-seller relationship itself and the diversity of its incarnations. It has revealed that ‘effective’ or ‘high quality’ relationships can come in various different guises; the three prototypes discussed in this paper only represent ideal types that indicate the range of relational constellations within ‘personal’ salesperson-client relationships. Further research will undoubtedly uncover a greater variety of forms and

dimensions.

From a managerial perspective, this exploratory research indicates that the distinction between ‘discrete’ and ‘relational’ exchange (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) may not be adequate to manage the multitude of human interactions between sales staff and clients. It is crucial to dig deeper into the nature of each and every client-salesperson constellation in order to assess the needs of a buyer or prospective client, the personal abilities of the salesperson servicing the account and the influence of external factors such as corporate culture or industry ethics. With this information, sales managers can match not only the personalities of buyer and seller, but also decide on different relational strategies. To use a mundane example: clients who favor cultivated relationships will be happy to attend a company-sponsored event, while such invitations are more than likely wasted on the ‘business-only’ relational actor and could potentially offend a client who prefers ‘untainted’ relationships with their sales counterparts.

Methodological Limitations

As pointed out previously, grounded theory offers a method of theory generation that mixes two modes of theorizing that are traditionally opposed: the idiographic approach, which is concerned with understanding the individual case, and the nomothetic, which is concerned with the discovery of general laws. Such a hybrid approach leaves itself open to attack from two different angles - from the traditional empiricist school of scientific research on the one hand and from interpretive researchers of different methodological persuasions on the other. Indeed, ever since the publication of “The Discovery of Grounded Theory” in 1967, critics have not been slow to point out potential

shortcomings of the method:

It is not clear [...] whether grounded theory offers us the best or worst of both worlds. If the best, it offers a way of producing generalizations through comparison while retaining a holistic sense of causal complexity. If the worst, we lose both the depth of intensive theorizing and the rigor of comparative inquiry (Dey, 1999, p. 229).

Researchers from different qualitative research traditions in particular have been rather unsympathetic to its principles and procedures. They often consider the structure of the grounded theory method to be overly restrictive for the inherently artistic process that is qualitative data analysis. The authors of this paper acknowledge this criticism to a certain extent. The grounded theory method is indeed a highly prescriptive approach to qualitative data analysis and the vocabulary seems at times unnecessarily technical. However, the very rigor that can stifle the creative process of qualitative inquiry also guarantees the analytical thoroughness needed for theory development. The vocabulary offered by the method assists in making the often-mystical leap from data to conclusions in qualitative research studies more transparent and assessable; it also allows for the construction of a common ground between researchers from different theoretical camps and convictions.

From the viewpoint of researchers working in a deductive mode, the grounded theory adage that specific literature is only to be consulted after the primary research has been carried out implies the possibility that extant research efforts are duplicated and no incremental knowledge contribution to the field made. In the present study, both authors had prior knowledge of the relationship selling and marketing literature; however, the few specific articles examining the nature of personal marketing relationships (Price and Arnould, 1999; Swan *et al.*, 2001; Liljander and Roos, 2001) were only consulted as the

primary research drew to an end.

This strategy guaranteed that existing frameworks and concepts did not influence the inquiry. In grounded theory research, extant literature is to be considered as additional data. In this sense, rather than being rendered invalid, the present framework was corroborated by prior investigations conducted in different conditions. Furthermore, as all three of the mentioned studies are qualitative in nature, the results of each study add to a pool of findings across cultures and relational constellations that, in the future, may lead to what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call ‘formal’ theory.

Future research directions

With modifiability being a major consideration of grounded theory researchers, the authors of this paper encourage researchers to test and expand the presented framework in future qualitative or quantitative investigations. Specifically, given the necessarily limited sample size of this study, future research may explore whether the three relational types are correlated to the development phase of the relationship as identified by Dwyer *et al.* (1987). In this study, all relationships studied were fully developed; in one case, a ‘business only’ relationship had lasted for almost a decade without any sign of developing into a ‘cultivated’ one. However, a larger sample may reveal patterns of development between relationship types that were not uncovered here. Likewise, although the researchers made a deliberate attempt to examine gender differences, the limited sample size and the under-representation of women in the study (only 9 of the 36 interviewees were women) precluded any conclusive statement on the link between relational type and gender.

Finally, future research may explore the extent to which the present framework is culturally situated. The relationship typology presented reflects a range of socially acceptable and accepted behaviors between sales people and their clients in a business-to-business context in Ireland at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Even though the parallels between this account of relational practices and for example that of Bigus' (1972) American milkmen in the nineteen sixties are strikingly similar, it is more than likely that practices in different parts of the world and at different periods vary from the present framework.

Conclusion

Grounded theory originates from a concern with the social world of living actors and their interactions with other actors in that world. A proper reading of Strauss and/or Glaser's works makes it obvious that the method is largely anchored in this social psychological framework, which makes it particularly suitable for research in relationship selling and marketing: as salespeople work in a social world and interact with other social actors, an investigation into these structures has to include the world in which they are enacted and modified. In addition, the inductive, processual, and contextual focus of grounded theory makes it suitable for areas which themselves have an inductive, processual, and contextual character. Grounded theory was chosen as a methodological guide for the present study because the researchers intended to investigate a complex social phenomenon from an emic viewpoint while at the same time attempting to move beyond 'thick description' toward theory development. As a tool for inquiry and knowledge development, the method has delivered on the researchers' expectations; future research will reveal whether it has also achieved in advancing the research field.

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